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To Be Free or Not to Be Free... That Is the Question

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Kimberly Powell

To be Free or not to be Free...

That is the Question

“Feel the Bern!” crowds cheered as the elderly, white-haired man took to the podium. “Education should be a right,” he vehemently declared, “not a privilege. We need a revolution in the way that the United States funds higher education” (Sanders, 2016). Students rallied and applauded on the footsteps of the U.S. Capitol as the call for free education for all rang through the air. Although Bernie Sanders’s campaign ended in the primary election, the desire for change remained. Because of the increasing costs of postsecondary, many who have potential and desire to further their education find themselves unable because of a lack of funds. Others take out student loans but struggle to repay the debt. In Luke Redd’s article from trade-schools.net entitled Should College Be Free? Pros, Cons, and Alternatives, he fleshes out each perspective, both for and against the idea of free education, while offering possible solutions to this growing problem in America.

After briefly describing the obstacle of high tuition costs that many students face, Redd invites readers to harken back to the foundations of our country, to the words of John Adams: “The whole people must take upon themselves the education of the whole people and must be willing to bear the expense of it” (Redd, 2016). Later, the Morrill Act was passed in 1862 with the goal of opening up the option of higher education to lower-income individuals. Back in the early days of America, a college education was tuition-free, but over time, funding from the states has decreased as tuition costs have steadily increased, reaching rates that are unaffordable to many low-income families. Those who do attend inevitably face the burden of student debt. Analyzing statistics from the Federal Reserve, Redd discerned that “in 2015, the total amount of student loan debt in America was estimated to be about \$1.3 trillion,” which proved to be a dramatic increase from previous years (Redd, 2016). Yes, financial aid and Pell Grants provide some assistance on the journey through higher education, but the percentage of coverage has decreased over the years. Despite the financial roadblocks, the number of students attending college has continuously risen over the past 15 years. The U.S. Department of Education has found that “over 20 million students were enrolled in American post-secondary schools in the fall of 2015, which was almost five million more than in 2000” (Redd, 2016).

With a basic understanding of the problem that has evolved over the years, Redd begins to explain the support for having free college for all. Economically speaking, individuals with skills obtained through a college education would better fill the open positions in today's labor force, boosting the economy in multiple aspects. Besides this measurable benefit of free college, there is also a moral standard that we as Americans must cling to. Redd believes America has always sought for equality between its citizen, and the area of education is no exception. Everyone, including those in a lower class, should have the same opportunity to enjoy the benefits of a college education. Like Bernie Sanders, some Americans view a college education as a right rather than a privilege. In order to pay for the schooling of an entire nation, Redd offers several options. An increase in taxes for the wealthiest Americans, a decrease in inefficient spending, and several other adjustments could help make this idea of free college a reality (Redd, 2016).

The concept of free tuition is not merely an American dream; in fact, several countries, particularly in Europe, have offered free college for quite some time now. Because the tuition is free, students graduate college with significantly less debt than those who graduate in American schools. Comparatively, the United States does not spend more on education than countries that do offer free education. "The U.S. spends about 1.36 percent [of the national GDP] on post-secondary education," Redd states, "But Finland, Norway, and Germany only spend 2.08 percent, 1.96 percent, and 1.35 percent" (Redd, 2016). Redd believes that if free college is a reality in other countries, then America should be no exception. Some states have already begun to offer free community college, while others are in the process of passing laws to create two-year programs that are of no cost to its students. Kalamazoo, Michigan has been one of the most proactive leaders in the pursuit of free public education. As a result of the Kalamazoo Promise, students from low-income homes have a higher chance of choosing to go to college to better their future.

As one can imagine, there exists a detailed opposition to having free college education in America, particularly among the upper class. Taxes, for instance, would dramatically increase, having a harmful effect on the households and the economy at large. Additionally, making college free, Redd explains, would not necessarily solve the problem. Many students are simply unable to learn in those particular environments and would not succeed given the opportunity. And many who do take the chance still do not succeed. Redd states that "only about 20 percent of first-time, full-time students at public two-year colleges earn associate's degrees, diplomas, or certificates within three years of starting" (Redd, 2016). And furthermore, since free-college would only be offered to public schools, those who would fair better in a private school might not

be able to afford education without the support from financial aid. Ultimately, students may become less motivated because they no longer have to worry about funds, which would increase dependency on government and decrease the value of hard work.

Redd offers an alternative to the previously mentioned options, a method that remains affordable without fearing a high increase in taxes. Instead of the constant rates that newly grads must pay off, he suggests a system where individuals pay back debts based on their income levels. In this system, there should be no interest attached to the loan itself, and because college is not altogether free, taxpayers would not suffer as much. Unlike a free-college system, this alternative route holds the students responsible for their actions while in college, increasing the personal value of hard work and dedication. Despite the long list of alternatives, the author leaves the ultimate decision up to the reader. It is the reader who determines which stance to choose, but furthermore, it is the reader alone who determines which stance to choose, but furthermore, it is the reader alone who can determine the validity of Redd's argument. Although he is able to thoroughly explain both sides of the argument as well as the alternatives, the author commits several logical fallacies, which ultimately detract from his overall ethos as a writer and makes his argument less effective.

Before diving into the argument presented, it is necessary to evaluate the author's credentials; however, when viewers of the website go to look for the website's author, they will come up empty handed, for there is no reference to the author on the website itself. Upon entering the URL into an automated bibliography maker, the name Luke Redd appeared. After further investigation on the web, his Google + profile proved to be the only source of reliable information in regards to his background. According to his profile, Redd does not have any expertise or education that would make him a credible source of information. His profile merely states that he "writes about education, careers, and life" and works for the website Trade-Schools.

This website, as many websites do, contributes a bias that prevents valid arguments from being discussed over the course of Redd's article. Trade-Schools goal, as described on its homepage, is to provide options for career training, opening eyes of potential students to the many schooling options. Additionally, the website offers tools to locate nearby schools. Because the website has a heavy focus on pursuing additional education after high school, Redd's essay does not leave mention alternatives to post-secondary. In many of his arguments, he relays the idea that people will not succeed or be happy in life without getting a college degree of some kind. In his opening paragraph, Redd states the following:

When the cost of attending college, university, or trade school is too high, a lot of students simply choose not to pursue a higher education. And that leaves many of them ill-equipped to find good employment, let alone attain the American dream (Redd, 2016). Because the bias of the website seeks to promote further education, the possibility of succeeding without an education does not exist. Despite Redd's attempts to provide a well-balanced argument for free education, he ignores many alternative possibilities due to a hasty generalization.

His hasty generalization is but one of many logical fallacies that Redd commits throughout the course of his article, the first of which is found in his opening argument for free education. In the midst of a bullet point list of reasons in support of the idea, Redd states, "People would have more freedom to contribute their talents...which could lead to happier people. And happier people could lead to a happier, more prosperous nation as whole" (Redd, 2016). While this may seem to be a logical conclusion, Redd's reasoning does not provide enough evidence for the conclusion drawn. This slippery slope fallacy is indicative of either a poorly researched topic or a lazy writer.

In hopes of making up for his own lack of credibility, the author commits another logical fallacy, one that appeals to higher authority. When questioning whether free public college was a viable option in America, Redd asserts in the opening paragraph that certainly the heads of America believe so. "You don't have to look any further than President Obama. Free [community] college...is something that he has proposed" (Redd, 2016). Although his reference is relatable to readers, Redd fails to adequately support his claim partly because he does not provide further detailed information on the topic but also because Redd is relying too heavily on the credibility of the President rather than his own ethos.

Furthermore, as if both of these fallacies were not serious enough, the author, either out of ignorance or intentionality, misinterprets some references, picking out information that supports his argument rather than accurately describing the context itself. When attempting to establish a precedence for free college early in his article, Redd stated, "The Morrill Act of 1862 enabled land-grant colleges to be created by states so that higher education could become available to Americans of every social class" (Redd, 2016). Although affordability has resulted from the enactment of the Morrill Act of 1862, it was not originally created for that purpose. According the Encyclopædia Britannica, the act was meant to establish colleges focused on "agriculture and mechanic arts" as opposed to the many liberal arts colleges available at the time (Land-Grant College Act of 1862, 2017). Redd, in hopes of supporting his viewpoint, mistakes

the results of the act for what original intention of the act actually was. He claimed that the purpose of the act was to offer a college education to those in lower social classes when in reality the purpose of the act was to merely establish certain types of colleges.

Later, he discusses multiple examples of tuition free college in other countries, raving about how students in countries such as Denmark, Estonia, and Germany graduate with significantly less debt than those in the United States (Redd, 2016). Additionally, Redd highlights how these other countries do not spend significantly more on education than the United States currently does, so having free college would not be a major burden on the government. What Redd fails to acknowledge is the many downsides to free education in those other countries. According to the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development, these countries have drastically higher taxes than the United States has currently (Jackson, 2015). The burden of tuition falls on the people as a whole rather than entirely the individuals attending college, which may seem nice, but defeats the purpose of making life more affordable. Furthermore, the percentage of students enrolled in college is much lower in these other countries than in the United States (Jackson, 2015). Since there are fewer individuals attending college in these other countries, it is consequently less expensive to foot the bill for college education. Redd's article highlights only the favorable aspects of free education in other countries that support his argument, failing to acknowledge the negative parts.

Because of the length of Redd's article, one would think that each perspective is thorough and well thought out, yet the opposite proves to be true. With a closer look at the details of the article, the reader finds several claims that seem powerful but lack backing or any sort of explanation. After briefly describing the historical background of free college, Redd bullet points random facts and statistics but provides no backing or explanations for the claims. In his later uses of bullet points, Redd takes the liberty to express various hypothetical situations while supplying no factual information for support. When discussing the reasons for free college, Redd states, "Many of America's top-performing high school students never apply to the most challenging colleges and universities even though they have the ability to succeed in them" (Redd, 2016). However, he never takes the time to support this statement with factual information such as a statistic or expert testimony. His lack of explanation in various circumstances not only leaves the reader with several unanswered questions but also damages his ethos in an unsalvageable manner.

To be free or not to be free. That is the question that remains unanswered upon reading the conclusion of Redd's article; however, when questions arise concerning the effectiveness of

the article itself, they are answered with a long list of fallacies committed in various ways by a cursory author. Luke Redd's lack of expertise in combination with the website's bias set a weak basis for his seemingly thorough argument. Because of his hasty generalizations, misinterpretations, and lack of explanation, Redd's article proved to be much less effective than it could potentially have been.

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